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RIOT AND REPRESENTATION: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CHICANO RIOT

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In the wake of the riot of Mexican-Americans in East Los Angeles on August 29, 1970 (with an encore on September 16), the various mouthpieces of the "left" have as usual raised their tiresome duststorm of protest, which never fails to bury the real significance of events. Hidden by shows of outrage at the police, by pleas that power better give the Chicanx their share of the pie or else things might get out of hand again, by the martyrdom of a newspaper reporter who ducked into one too many bars, is the real event, the burning and looting, the riot. The noise of the left, and the media in general, serves to direct attention away from, reduce to insignificance, or apologize for the attack on bourgeois property rights. The left is so concerned with defending its right to arrange demonstrations and speeches, as boring to the participants as they are inconsequential to power, that it fails to celebrate the spontaneous activity of the people and to reveal its theoretical content.

The riot covered a three-square-mile area. Windows were smashed in virtually every store along a twelve block area and people felt free to loot and burn: one hundred seventy-eight businesses were hit, seven extensively damaged by fire. Police radio cars were burned and a bus of police reinforcements was attacked. Let the mystifyers talk about the "issue" of violence. A riot is a practical critique of the system, while a demonstration can serve to perpetuate what it seems to oppose. This riot interrupted a "Chicano moratorium" demonstration "against the war" which a coalition of Mexican-American groups had organized. Here the shared opposition of an ethnic group whose human potentialities are especially denied is falsified by being directed into demands for a more equitable share in the hierarchical system which dominates life generally. The demonstration was represented by its official organizers as a bid for fewer Chicano boys in Vietnam and more Chicano capitalists in East Los Angeles. The people were handled as constituents, brought together over particular issues. This false unity channels dissent into fragmentary opposition as it dissimulates the possibility of transforming the world totally. The so-called issue, whether it be the ratio of Chicanos in Vietnam, or the war itself, or United States foreign policy, serves to direct consciousness away from the totality and the possibility of liberating every aspect of daily life. Single-issue consciousness perpetuates hierarchical perception,

concentrating on one aspect of the social conditions without revealing the whole. Demonstrations perpetuate hierarchical relationships. Twenty thousand bodies showed up to march and then to submit themselves to the boredom of listening to leaders speak about the designated issues which were to give the gathering its apparent unity.

moratorium

But after the march, as the speakers were to begin, a crowd of thirsty demonstrators filled a nearby liquor store and began to help themselves to soft drinks and beer. The owner quickly locked the front door and when sheriff's deputies arrived, "they let everyone out of the store one by one only after they had paid for their refreshments. Because of the anger of the crowd the deputies at the door were the first to be hit by rocks, the witness said" (*Los Angeles Times*).

Here the cops appear in their familiar and essential role as watchdogs of the commodity.[(1)] Poised in readiness, they attack to protect the chastity of the commodity, to disallow its rules being violated by some who, on this occasion, in the spirit of celebration, would not submit to its rationality. Acts which challenge bourgeois property rights have a clarity which could not be imagined by those who, thinking of themselves as representatives of the people, organize the passivity of the people by arranging monitored demonstrations for them. These representatives really serve the masters. In fact, the parade officials, true to their intentions to preserve hierarchical order, revealed their own collusion with the watchdogs. "Rosalio Munoz, chairman of the committee that organized the parade, said Sunday that deputies could have prevented much of the violence had they contacted parade officials before attempting to disperse the crowd. He said he and other parade organizers had been working closely with the Sheriff's Department before the parade and that a plan had been developed to prevent trouble." The plan was not put into effect, said a Lt. Wallace, because "there was not time to contact Munoz or other parade officials."

Too late. The potlatch of destruction had begun. Bands of demonstrators ran up Whittier Boulevard smashing windows. A witness said: "It looked like wholesale looting. Whole families would pull up in front of appliance stores and go in and pick out a television set and drive away with it" (UPI). A fire station was attacked and the state and national flags were torn down. Pedestrians on both sides of Whittier Boulevard played target practice with patrol cars, having to aim their rocks just ahead of the cars as they sped by — sometimes missing the cars and hitting those on the other side of the street. It was a game and the commodity played its part, receiving its criticism in the streets; TV and stereo consoles were rolled out from the stores and combined with bus stop benches and logs in the construction of barricades for slowing down the targets. Here the goods which encourage passivity are turned against the forces of pacification. They acquire a new use in the hands of those who would not submit themselves to their logic, but who find a superior logic in the game of subversion.

The looter takes the "affluent" society at its word. They accept the abundance, only they don't submit themselves to the suffering that the society inflicts on those who sacrifice themselves for what it encourages them to want. They want to possess the commodities shown to them everywhere, in the shop windows, in the media, while rejecting the rules of exchange and the sacrifice they entail. They reject the commodity form which encloses goods in its grip and molds them according to the motives of profit, according to the false needs created by Madison Avenue.

Once the commodity is not paid for, it is open to practical criticism; it becomes a toy, the principle of play takes over. Stealing as opposition to the organization of society is the negation of the rationality of the commodity. The goods can be put to the service of a radical subjectivity free from the sacrifices that perpetuate commodity production and consumption and they find themselves on a new field, the field of play. The commodity is freed to be used in the destruction of the bourgeois world and ipso facto in its own destruction. Only when the means of production become toys for the manipulation of the proletariat, the class which ends class society, will life be freed from hierarchical subordination to commodity values.

The Chicanxs of East Los Angeles — as the Blacks and the students — realize themselves as the new proletariat as they recognize that they have no control over the use of their lives. This recognition is penetrating ever more sections of a society which can count only on numbing it by feeding it a spectacle of dissent so that the recognition, caught in contemplation, may fail to translate itself into the coherent practical activity which will destroy the spectacle itself: a panoply of images which everyone is encouraged to contemplate so as to ignore the poverty of their own everyday life.

The commodity is the heart of the spectacle. In itself a TV or a refrigerator is a passive, insensible thing in submission to the first comer to make use of it. In the spectacle, its image parades, ever suggestively, for the admiration of a passive consumer who submits themselves more and more to their own passivity. Having no real power over material abundance, they are reduced to choosing from among the false alternatives offered to him: Ford or Chevy, Tide or Cheer, Humphrey or Nixon. The spectacle invades their life, emptying it of self-activity. The people of East Los Angeles show by their actions the desire to cease to be mere consumers; in their gaiety they betray a desire for life over and above the "fair share" in abundance which their integration into the American hierarchy would assure them. The prosperity they might share is not a static sphere, but rather a ladder without end. Whatever buying power an individual may attain, they will still not have power over their own life. Life remains subordinated to commodity values, most clearly for minority groups because they suffer the humiliation of having their human riches especially despised. The question is the control of material abundance, whether it is to be dished out in ever fairer amounts according to the rationality of the commodity form, or whether it is to come under the power of collective imagination, into the field of play. The protest of the rioter is not Chicano protest or Black protest or student protest, it is the protest of the real single individual unmediated, sacrificing themselves to no ideal absolute, whether party, nationality or community. A riot is an explosion of radical

subjectivity in which the identity of the claims of the individual and of the collective begins to show itself practically. To the old world it is insanity. "Everyone was crazy, just crazy," said the owner of an appliance store in Wilmongton, a town near LA where a riot broke out the next day. "Somebody would throw a brick through a window and everyone would laugh and clap." It is a superior logic which will destroy the old world.

Let the capitalists grieve over the one million dollars in damage. By destroying commodities, by burning the palaces of commodity consumption, the rioters assert their human superiority over the dead things which dominate life.

The project of the subversion of the commodity and the transformation of the world which it dominates is beginning again in earnest. It flames up in a riot. As repression contains it, the sense of a riot may be lost even to the participants. The spontaneity of the riot is replaced by the representation of it by the left; the memory of it is reified, contained ideologically, catapulted into the spectacle as a special and specialized phenomenon, "the Chicano riot," with its own particular issues trailing it like tails. In the spectacle it is just another riot to titillate the need for excitement, here consumed passively. An exciting life is what remains to be constructed by the revolutionary proletariat. Where authentic revolt does not recognize itself for what it is, the routine of daily life reasserts itself and revolt fails to continue.

riots

The proletarian project will be realized as people who recognize their own powerlessness begin to take power over their own lives. The proletariat has begun to sketch its solution to the problem of the social organization of its power in the historical experience of Workers Councils (Russia 1905, Kronstadt 1921, Spain 1936, Hungary 1956), direct and total democracy in control of the means of production and all aspects of life.

As the new revolutionary movement (marked for example by Hungary 1956, Watts 1965,[2] and France 1968, and as distinguished from the traditional revolutionary proletarian movement) gains momentum, it cannot fail to gain consciousness of itself as an international movement in opposition to a universally dominant system. A local outburst adds its significance to a sequence of events which aims toward the transformation of a world totally dominated by the rationality of the commodity, by private or state capitalism, by bosses, by bureaucrats.

The terrain of struggle is no longer limited to work. As the rationality of the commodity-spectacle reaches out into every aspect of daily life, so does the struggle against it, its motive being nothing other than the will to live. Caught in the vortex of consumption, many do not yet realize that the activities which fill up both work and leisure destroy life as surely as poison. Those who imagine that any particular or quantitative changes can ultimately satisfy the will to live in a world of material abundance surely underestimate the power of human spontaneity and its hunger to take hold of all things.

HUMANITY WON'T BE HAPPY UNTIL
THE LAST BUREAUCRAT IS HUNG WITH
THE GUTS OF THE LAST CAPITALIST

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